

I AM THAT I AM

The Trinitarian Gnosis of Meister Eckhart

Le Père ne peut vouloir qu'une chose: C'est engendrer le Fils Unique. Et il l'engendre par l'Esprit-Saint. C'est là Oeuvre du Père, et il n'y a pas d'autres oeuvres.

Abbé Stéphane

*In dem begin / hô uber sin / ist ie daz wort.
ô richer hort, / dô ie begin begin gebar!
ô vader brust, / ûz der mit lust / daz wort ie vlôz!
doch hat der schôz / daz wort behalden, daz ist wâr.*

Meister Eckhart

The doctrine of the Trinity is certainly one of the main points of divergence between the “wisdom of the wise” and the “divine foolishness” of Christian revelation. As such the conception of the Trinitarian God – an indispensable cornerstone of Christianity – has often become a stumbling block for all kinds of self-stylized *gnostikoi* who cannot help but see the “merely triune” God as somehow inferior to the absolute One. It is thus not uncommon for certain “*ésotéristes hâtifs*”¹ to view the Trinity as somehow “relative” and not “ultimate”², a kind of “lesser Absolute” (*apara-Brahman*), analogous to the *Ishvara*³ of

¹ Cf. François Chenique’s introductory note to Treatise I.5 in Abbé Stéphane, *Introduction à l’Ésoterisme Chrétien* (“Ce traité ... s’adresse aux ‘ésotéristes hâtifs’ qui s’imaginent trop facilement que le Christianisme n’a de l’Absolu que des conceptions superficielles, voire enfantine”, etc.).

² This assertion is for example commonly expressed in the writings of Frithjof Schuon (cf. *The Transcendent Unity*, VIII: “The Trinity necessarily corresponds to a more relative point of view than that of Unity”). However, since Schuon’s critique of the Trinity and his own metaphysical conception of it are quite idiosyncratic and would merit a separate treatment, we can only address them *en passant* at present (on this cf. Borella, *Problèmes de Gnose*, VII).

³ *Ishvara* is “Universal Being” or the “Divine Personality” (the Principle of, and in relation to, universal manifestation) as the first determination of the superessential “Non-being”, i.e. the supreme *Brahman*, which is “unqualified” (*nirguna*), “beyond all distinctions” (*nirvisheshā*), and absolutely unconditioned

bhakti-yoga, the “face of God turned towards the creature”, but of which the *jñānin* knows that it, too, is (*sub specie aparavidyā*) but a product of the *Mahāmâyā*

The Christian thinker that is probably most often cited in support of such theses is Meister Eckhart, who, with his suspect “*apophatisme impersonnel de la divinité-néant*” (Lossky), has long been claimed as a “secret ally” in all such endeavors. This should not come as a surprise, however. After all, the Meister and his work have, throughout their long, controversial history, been appropriated by the most diverse groups all of whom did not hesitate to happily identify Eckhart as “one of their own”. To the Protestants he seemed as a forerunner of Luther, to the idealists as a pre-modern Hegel; the romantics celebrated him as a mystical pantheist and even the Nazis and Alfred Rosenberg could not resist the *mysterium fasciosum* of this enigmatic thinker, proclaiming him a “prophet of the Germanic spirit”. In sum, the writings of Eckhart (which, until quite recently, were only known in dispersed fragments of often dubious authenticity) are like a mirror reflecting the image of the beholder, a sphinx revealing to each inquirer the very answer that he desires. No wonder, then, that, especially ever since the increasing influx of Eastern “mysticism” in the West, certain adherents of Far Eastern traditions, “deliberately ignoring his teachings on the indispensability of uncreated grace and the Incarnate Word”, have tried to acknowledge the Meister “as a fellow Zen Buddhist or as a Brahmanic seer” (Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, I.1).

We’ll hardly need to point out that all such interpretative appropriations are obviously baseless; Eckhart was a Christian first and foremost, a searcher of the Scriptures and an eager student of the newly canonized Thomas Aquinas as well of the *libri platonicorum*. However, even though there have been, in recent times, attempts to rehabilitate Eckhart as an orthodox Thomist (which is likewise questionable), it is undeniable that his oeuvre has been, from the very beginning, subject to a lot of criticism and misunderstanding from within his own ranks as well. And even today there is many a commentator that cannot shake the suspicion that, behind all his neatly construed scholastic diction, there lurks indeed an ominous monism of the One that is “*plus platonizans quam christianizans*”.

(cf. Guénon, *Man and his becoming*, I). There are certainly similarities to the Plotinian conception of the *Noûs* (viz. *ousia*) as the first “product” of the absolutely transcended One (*to hen*), which is obviously more pertinent to the specific milieu in which Eckhart’s own thought unfolded; however, while such analogical approximations can be of some utility at times, we have to keep in mind that these two conception are not strictly speaking convertible.

Now, as anyone who has only a slight familiarity with the Eckhartian corpus will surely know, it is undoubtedly true that there are loci where Eckharts seems indeed to draw a sharp distinction between “God” and “Godhead”, *apara-* and *para-Brahmam*, which are “as different as heaven and earth”! (cf. Sermon. 56). However, one should be careful to immediately try and map the dichotomy of (personal) “Trinity” and (impersonal) “Unity” on these categories. In the vast majority of cases Eckhart is merely distinguishing between “God-as-other”, i.e. God insofar as He is “relative” to the creature and known according to his “*opera exteriora quam sint ‘longe in regio dissimilitudines’*” (Sermon. IX), that is to say as Creator, Lord, Savior, Judge, etc.⁴, and God as He is in Himself, the supreme Principle, who transcend all in His immaculate Absoluteness and in whom there can be no “otherness” or duality “in the proper sense of the word”⁵ – “*in Deo non enim est aliud*”.

This distinction of God *in se* (or the “Godhead”), utterly independent of all created things and wholly beyond, and God *quoad nos*, the “God” who is “proclaimed by all the creatures”⁶, is of course simply a commonplace in Christian theology, whether it be formulated in the Eastern distinction of *energeia* and *ousia* or according to a more scholastic ontology, like in St. Thomas (cf. *S.Th.* I.13). And even though this antinomy is often pushed, by the preacher Eckhart, to the maximum of its effect, resulting not seldom in formulations that may indeed

⁴ As St. Thomas likewise says: “because the signification of ‘Lord’ includes the idea of a servant and vice versa, these two relative terms, ‘Lord’ and ‘servant’, are simultaneous by nature. Hence, God was not ‘Lord’ until He had a creature subject to Himself” (*S.Th.* I.13.7.6), which also means that as soon as the “creature” disappears when it “breaks through” to the “fount and river of the Godhead” where all is simply one, so does the “Lord” (and it is in this way that Eckhart can say that “God becomes and debecomes”).

⁵ Cf. Cusanus, *Apologia doctae*: “‘From the fact that there is no number in God, in whom trinity is oneness, it follows that in God there is no difference in the proper sense of the word (*tunc proprie non est differentia in divinis*)’, i.e. in accordance with the word’s usual assignment (*secundum impositionem vocabuli*)”. Indeed, according to the Cusan (*De li Non aliud*), “Not-Other” might even be the name “which most closely befigures the unnameable name of God (in Himself)”.

⁶ Cf. Sermon. 56: “God becomes when all creatures say ‘God’ – then God comes to be ... That is how all creatures speak of God. And why do they not speak of the Godhead? Everything that is in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said. God works, the Godhead does no work: there is nothing for it to do, there is no activity in it. It never peeped at any work. God and Godhead are distinguished by working [i.e. acting externally] and not-working”.

“offend pious ears” (“*biten wit got, daz wir gotes ledic werden*”!), we shouldn’t think that he is somehow breaching the boundaries of common orthodoxy here.

Nevertheless it would certainly be too easy to dismiss Eckhart of all charges on these grounds alone, for there are also times where the Meister seems to suggest that in our ascend to the “Godhead”, we do indeed “go beyond” the Trinity as such; a theory for which McGinn has coined the term of the “God beyond God hypothesis”.

The *locus classicum* in support for this thesis is the (in)famous passage in Sermon 2 (*Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum*), in which the Meister tells us of a “*bürgelîn*” in the soul (variously translated as “fortress”, “citadel”, or “castle”), which is so “completely one and simple” (*einig ein und einvaltig*) that “no one can gaze into it, not even God Himself”.⁷

God Himself never looks in there for one instant, insofar as He exists in modes and in the properties of His Persons. This should be well noted: this One Alone lacks all mode and property. And therefore, for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine Names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside, should He ever look in there. But only insofar as He is one and indivisible, without mode or properties, can He do this: in that sense He is neither Father, Son, nor Holy Ghost, and yet is a Something which is neither this nor that.

Here it seems indeed as if Eckhart would draw radical distinction between the Trinitarian Persons and the “solitary One” (*einig ein*); as if behind the Trinitarian “face” (*persona*) there was yet hidden an ominous *Deus absconditus*, which “eyes have not seen nor hath ear heard”.

Thus, in the following, we want to take this proposition as an opportunity to lay out the metaphysical interpretation of the Trinity as expounded by Eckhart (and, in extension, the whole tradition of what could be called “Christian Platonism”) by giving a brief outline of the process which the Meister calls “the eternal birth of the Word” (*die ewige geburt*).

⁷ We might note in passing that, in commenting on the text of Luke 10:38, Eckhart actually points us to an unexpected analogy. Thus, already the Vedic Rishis tell us of a “castle of Brahman” (*brahmapura*), which lies in the “treasure chambre (or lotus) of the heart” (cf. *Chând. Up.* VIII.1); recall also the Buddhist mantra of the “jewel in the lotus flower” (*om mani padme hûm*), which can be symbolically approached to the jewel of Christ bedded in the *Rosa Mystica* that is the Most Blessed Virgin (“the Sun in the moon-cradle”) and by extension in every “virginal” soul in which is hidden the “pearl of the Kingdom” (cf. Matt. 13:44-6): Jesu-Maria – *Âtmâ-Mâyâ*.

Now, let it be clear from the start that this *processus* can hardly be called a “process” at all, because the “eternal birth” is, as it were, *eternal*, and obviously does not pertain to any time or space whatsoever, but takes place “in the eternal now (*nunc aeternitatis*) in which God dwells from all eternity and in which the emanation of the Divine Person eternally is, was and will be” (In Gen.). If we nevertheless use any temporal preposition to expound on the matter (which is sometimes unavoidable, us being limited creatures), these are to be understood in a strictly “logical” manner, that is to say *in ordine cognoscendi*. As already Böhme warns us:

When I talk about the birth of God out of Himself, I have to talk in a devilish manner, as if the Eternal Light was kindled from darkness, or as if the Godhead had a beginning ... But in God there is no first and no last but only His eternal birth without beginning and end (*Aurora*, XXIII).

Spoken in such a “devilish manner” we could thus say that *in principio* (i.e. in the eternal Principle) was Non-being. Now this “Non-being” does in no way mean “nothing” (“In the beginning of the beginning there was not even nothing”, states one Taoist text) but simply absolute indeterminacy, the “Universal Possibility”⁸ or what Eckhart calls “*mügentheit*”⁹, the pure Infinitude of the Divine Essence.

Eckhart speaks here simply of “the One” (*einige ein* or *unum*) or the “groundless ground” of the Godhead (*grundlose grunt*) and it is certainly within this “ground” of absolute simplicity that we also have to locate the “fortress” (*bürgelîn*) in which “not even God can gaze into”.

In this “fathomless sea of Divinity” (*grundlose mere der gotheit*) there is from all eternity an eternal will, the “will to something” (*der*

⁸ *Nota bene* that Universal Possibility presents merely the Infinite as envisaged under a certain aspect (i.e. its passive perfection), that is to say under the point of view of the minimum amount of determination required to render it actually conceivable to us and as such the one is not simply reducible to the other (cf. Guénon, *The Multiple States*, I).

⁹ The word *mügentheit* can refer to both “power” (*posse* as *potestas*) and “possibility” (*posse* as *possibilitas*). “The *mügentheit* is the ‘power’, which is ascribed to the Fathers and which expresses itself in creation and the Incarnation” (cf. Haug, *Meister Eckhart: Werke I*, Kommentar). Similarly C.F. Kelley: “When Eckhart speaks of ‘divine power’ (*mügentheit*) or ‘all-mighty’ he means ‘all-possibility’” (cf. *Divine Knowledge*, Notes). We could even consider the *all-mügentheit* of Eckhart as an almost exact translation of the Plotinian *dynamis pantôn* (most often rendered as “the power of all things”, i.e. the enabling condition of being as such), which Eckhart might have picked up through some secondary source.

Wille zum Ichts) as Böhme calls it, the desire to reveal His infinite riches to Himself, according to the sacred tradition (*hadith qudsî*): “I was a hidden treasure and I yearned to be known”.

“The primordial dawn is the will of the Father”, says Eckhart (Lib. Pos.), and it is the eternal will of the Father to give birth to His only-begotten Son.¹⁰ Thus, in “the secret treasury of eternal Fatherhood” (Serm. 22) He eternally and without ceasing (*ewig und âne underlâz*) gives birth to the Word out of His All-Possibility¹¹ (*ûz aller seiner mügentheit*); a procession which is also described as an *ûzbruch* (“breaking forth”) or *bullitio* (literally: “boiling”), “an emanation from the depths of silence ... as if you were to imagine something swelling up from itself and in itself and then inwardly ‘boiling’ without any ‘boiling over’ yet understood” (Serm. XLIX).

“The first ‘going forth’ (*ûzbruch*) and the first ‘melting out’ (*ûzsmilzen*) is that in which Gods melts out into His Son and there He melts back into the Father” (Serm. 35). This primordial “out-flowing” (*exitus, emanatio, ûzganc, ûzfliessen*) is conceived by Eckhart essentially as an act of “self-revelation”, “a reflexive turning back of His existence into itself and upon itself and its dwelling and remaining fixed in itself” (*super se ipsum reflexiva conversio et in se ipso mansio sive fixio*), i.e.:

¹⁰ *Notabene*: In speaking about a “primordial will” here, we are already speaking “in a devilish manner”, for, as Eckhart tells us, in this prime emanation “*voluntate non cooperante sed potius concomitante*” (cf. also Serm. 49). There can be no talk of a quasi “disembodied will” (as in Böhme for example) which “precedes” and in a way “causes” the procession of the Persons; rather, it is simply in the very nature of the Essence to diffusive itself in the Trinitarian processions (“*eo siquidem bonum, quo sui diffusivum*”); it is this very diffusion itself and cannot be properly “abstracted” from the eternal birth: “*semper filium genuit et gignit, semper natus est, semper nascitur: flos est fructus, flos in fructa, fructus in flore*” (cf. Sir. 24:23). Eckhart is in no way a voluntarist. In fact, there is hardly a medieval thinker who was as radical in proclaiming the priority of intellect. When the Meister is speaking of the “will of the Father” this should be understood as marking that “point” where the “motherliness” (*muoterlicheit*) of the inoperable Essence, “becomes”, in the Person of the Father, the Principle of operation.

¹¹ Thus also Bonaventure, who likewise defines the begetting of the Son as the supreme expression (*expressio in summo*) of the paternal “power” (*posse*): “In Him the Father expresses the sum total of His possibility (*totum posse suum*); He speaks all He that He can (*dixit quae posset facere*) and expresses everything in Him, *omnia quae potuit*” (Hex. I.13/16; cf. in this context also Cusanus’ notion of God as the “*possest*”).

A ‘boiling’ or giving birth to itself – glowing in itself, and melting and boiling in and into itself, light that totally forces its whole being in light and into light and that is everywhere totally turned back and reflected upon itself, according to that saying of the sage: ‘The monad gives birth to the monad, and reflects upon itself in loving adoration’ (In Ex.).

The “simple One” of the Divine Abyss flows forth into the eternal Word (the Son) in which It knows Itself (as Father), and this knowledge of Himself by Himself, is consummated in the “in-flowing” (*reditus, restoratio, inganc, infliessen*) of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds in the communal “kiss” of Father and Son, and in whom all duality is “expired”¹²: “From the Divine Power (*mügentheit*) goes forth Wisdom (*wisheit*) and from both proceeds Love (*minne*)” (Serm. 31), so that all “possibility” (*mügentheit*) is in the Father, all “likeness”¹³ (*glicheit*) in

¹² Following Borella, we might even say that the doctrine of the *filioque*, namely that the Spirit is expired by the *two* distinct Persons of Father and Son as His *one* common Principle, and in which “the two become one” (while staying nevertheless distinct in their Personhood) is the key to all genuinely Christian non-dualism. On this “eternal procession of union”, i.e. the love of the Spirit proceeding *ab utroque*, cf. also Cusanus, *De docta*, I.9.

¹³ This “likeness” (a better translation might be “equality”) is – as everything predicated of God – only to be understood analogically or “figuratively”, for as Eckhart elaborates: “The One (*unum*) acts as a principle (*principiat*) through itself and gives existence and is an internal principle (*principium*). For this reason, properly speaking, it does not produce something ‘like’ itself, but what is one and the same as itself, because that which is only ‘like itself’ always contains distinction and numeric diversity, which is simply impossible in the One ... This is why the formal emanation in the divine Persons is a type of ‘boiling’ (*bulliito*) and thus the three Persons are simply and absolutely one ... They proceed from the One and return to the One ... the one Essence is their root and the three Persons are the one Essence” (In Ioh.).

As we can already gather from this passage, the Most Blessed Trinity is not in any way to be conceived of “numerically”, hence why all attempts to oppose the “relative Three” to the “absolute One” must fall short from the very beginning. “He who starts counting the Persons of the Trinity has already shown that he doesn’t understand it”, it has been said (“*si incipis numerare, incipis errare*”), for even though they are they are “several” (*plures*), they are not “many” (*multi*) but simply One (*unum*). God’s Oneness is not even “one” (*unum non unus*) but utterly transcends all “names and numbers”, that is to say that it is a *qualitative*, not *quantitative* unity, “numberless number” (*zal âne zal*): “*Deus autem est ab omni numero proprie eximitur. Est enim unus sine unitate, trinus sine trinitate, sicut bonus sine qualitate*” (Serm. XI). The Infinity of the Divine Essence is not “split” between the three Persons – a “plurality of infinities” being of course an absurdity – but possessed wholly by each of them and,

the Son, and all “union” (*einunge*) in the Spirit (Serm. 3).

This unity (or rather “non-duality”) is so utterly complete that the Divine Knowing is not to be misinterpreted as a knowledge of something; God knows Himself “without image” (*âne bilde*) and in the pure gnosis of His self-revelatory out-flowing He does not in any way become “object” to Himself, hence why it is said that “God doesn’t know what He is, for He is no *what*” (*Deus itaque nescit se, quid est, quia non est quid*).

Indeed, – and here the Christian tradition departs from its Platonic forbearers¹⁴ – God’s self-reflective knowledge (*sapientia*) is at the same time the supreme *ignorantia* – not as “privation” but precisely as the “*summa ac vera sapientia*”, the highest Wisdom itself.¹⁵ For the divine “knowing unknowing” (*docta ignorantia*) constitutes, as it were, a veritable *negatio negationis*, in which the Godhead fully affirms Himself in one ineffable, perfect, and infinite Act (“*Negatio vero negationis purissima et plenissima est affirmatio: ‘Ego sum, qui sum’*”. *Super se*

inversely, none of the Persons “adds” anything to the Essence as such (“*Numerus personarum non est per plurificationem unitatum, sed per replicationem ejusdem unitatis circa diversas hypostases*”, Bonaventure, *De scientia*, III.8). As Eckhart says elsewhere: “The unity is the distinction, and the distinction is the unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the unity, for that is distinction without distinction. If there were a thousand Persons, there would still not be more than one unity” (Serm. 10). This is not to say that the “number” of divine Persons is simply arbitrary (in fact, as we’ll say later on, Eckhart sees the structure of the Trinity mirrored in the entire fabric of reality); rather, in God (and only in God) infinite identity and infinite alterity coincide and it precisely because God possesses infinite identity that He can also be the infinitely Other (on this dialectic of the *maximum* and *minimum* cf. also Cusanus’ *De docta ignorantia*).

¹⁴ Although we might remark that in tractate VI.8 of the *Enneads*, Plotinus certainly approaches the later Christian readings of Eckhart et al. by defining the One as the “*causa sui*” (*aition heauton*) which not only causes, but – “in a sense” (*hoion*) – “wills” and “loves” itself, being “borne in a way inside itself, as though loving itself, in the pure radiance, being itself that which it loved, that is, it has made itself exist, if indeed it is persisting activity and the most loved thing, like Intellect” (VI.8.16). In this loving “inclination towards itself” – even going so far as positing “a sort of Intellect in the One” (i.e. prefiguring the reversion of the Noûs *eminentialiter*) – one can certainly find a premonition of the self-reflexive procession of the Trinity.

¹⁵ Thus Erigena: “Under divine Ignorance one ought to understand nothing else but the incomprehensible and infinite Knowledge of God Himself” and therefore “there is no ignorance in God for His Ignorance is, on the contrary, ineffable Knowledge” (*ipsius enim ignorantia ineffabilis est intelligentia*); “The divine Ignorance is supreme and true Wisdom” (cf. *Periphyseon*, 586C-598A).

imsum redit reditione completa, sibi ipsi innititur, se ipso est, ipsum esse est").

In this perfect *conversio* of the Essence upon itself, which is the very Life of the Trinity, all the premonitions of the sages find their fulfillment: Aristotle's "Thought thinking itself", the hermetic saying of the "monad begetting a monad" (*monas monadem gignens, in se unum reflectens ardorem*) and the 15th proposition of *De Causis* according to which "*omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa*"¹⁶ – whereby Eckhart puts the emphasis decisively on the "*completa*"¹⁷; for in this "outpouring of the naked Essence" (*naturam nudam formaliter profundens*) "*a se et de se ipso et in se ipso*", the Act of Understanding and That which is understood are absolutely one.¹⁸

This eternal unrestricted Act which comprehends the unlimited totality of His Possibilities is nothing other than the "Word" as the "infinite Concept" (*conceptus absolutus*) or "imageless Image" (*bilde âne bilde*) which God has of Himself (the "conception" of which is truly

¹⁶ Cf. also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 83: "All that is capable of self-knowledge is capable of every form of self-reversion" (*Pan to heauto gnôstikon pros heauto pantê epistreptikon estin*).

¹⁷ "*Ait autem signanter 'completa', quia ubicumque sistit reditio ad se, ibi sistit et cognitio, quia ibidem mox subintrat et manet alienum et per consequens incognitum*" (In Ioh.). This principle of "undiminished emanation" is a common theme among Christian Platonists; it also features prominently in the Trinitarian thought of St. Bonaventure (cf. *Itinerarium*, V/VI; *De Mysterio Trinitatis*, VIII). Like Eckhart, the Seraphic Doctor distinguishes between a twofold procession, namely the *diffusio intra Deum* and the *diffusio ad extra*. Picking up on the classic definition of the Good as the *diffusio sui ipsius*, he argues that in God, as the Highest Good, this diffusion cannot be an immediate "depotentialization" of itself into some lesser emanation (like in the Platonic scheme) but must indeed be a perfect diffusion (*perfectissima productio*), the sharing of His whole being with the (intra-divine) Other, "*diffundes communicat alteri totam substantiam et naturam*". Thus for God to be "the First" (*Primitas*), He also has to be *Trinitas*, for perfect Unity does not remain closed in on itself but is perfectly fecund in the eternal Trinitarian self-communication ("*Nam primitas summa in summo et altissimo principio ponit summam actualitatem, summam fontalitatem, summam fecunditatem*"): "The First Principle is – by virtue of being the First (*hoc ipso quod primum*) – that which produces most perfectly, that which most pours itself out in its emanation (*fontalissimum in emanando*), and that which is most fecund in its production" (De Mys. VIII).

¹⁸ Cf. Exp. in Ex.: "*Sciens et scitum sunt res una, quoniam scientia scientis essentiam suam est ex eo et ad eam – est ex eo quia est sciens, et ad eam qui est scitum*".

immaculate, for it does not in any way “limit” or “determine” the absolute simplicity of the Divine Essence).

Take heed! God the Father has complete insight into Himself and, profound and thorough knowledge of Himself by Himself (*abgründig durchkennen*), and not through any image. And thus God the Father gives birth to His Son in the true unity of the Divine Nature (Serm. 101).

This primal and perfect Act of knowing is the supreme Act, for even though divine simplicity necessitates that – “in principle” – all that God acts is but one *actus purus*, it is by His Knowing that all other acts are “actualized”, even His very act of being (*esse*) itself.

If there were one thing in God we could say was nobler than another, it would be His knowing (*verstanntnisse*): for by knowing God is manifested to Himself, in knowing God flows into Himself, in knowing God flows forth into all things, in knowing God created all things. If there were no knowing in God there could be no Trinity, and then no creature could have flowed forth (Serm. 80).

We might even say that if God was not Trinitarian, He wouldn’t *be* at all. The Divine Tri-unity appears thus not as an “exoteric” dogma but a metaphysical necessity, for if God (the *ens necessarium*) wasn’t Knowledge, there would indeed be “not even nothing” and “if the Son would not shine in the Father, the Father would be a dark valley” (Böhme).

God is the sheer “*visio sui ipsius*” (Ficino), “*visio absoluta*” (Cusanus), which, for Eckhart, also means that – contrary to the Thomistic primacy of “Being” (*ipsum esse subsistens*) – God’s Knowing “precedes” even His Being. In a sense, Eckhart’s God knows “before” He is, and He *is* only because He knows (“*Quia intelligit, ideo est*”); for, as we have seen, the first emanation of the paternal *mügentheit* is not “Being” (*wesen*) but “Wisdom” (*wisheit*): “*in principio erat Verbum*”.¹⁹

An inversion has taken place: Instead of viewing the Trinity ‘in being’, Eckhart views ‘being’ within the Trinity, now conceived as ‘an eternal and immutable going out and coming in: out of Godhead into being, and from being into Godhead’ (Smith, *Christian Gnosis*, VII).²⁰

¹⁹ Cf. Quaes. Par. I: “*Quia dicitur Ioh. 1: ‘In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum’. Non autem dixit Evangelista: ‘In principio erat ens et Deus erat ens’*”.

²⁰ As Lossky likewise observes: “The God of the ‘pure act of existence’ of St. Thomas corresponds, in the theology of Meister Eckhart, to the intellectual act

Thus, the divine Knowing circumscribes everything, so much so that the perfect unity of *esse* is only realized in the infinite *actus* of intellection itself. Indeed, from the most elevated point of view, the Trinitarian Life appears as nothing other than this primal Act of Knowing in which Knower and Known are perfectly one (*sciens et scitum sunt res una*), an act which lies beyond being (*altius quam esse*) and is the very principle of all being whatsoever (*fundamentum ipsius esse*).

God works beyond being (*über wesene*), in breadth, where He can move, and He works in Non-being (*unwesene*): before there was being, God was working: He wrought being where no being was. Masters of little subtlety say God is pure Being. He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a midge. I would be as wrong to call God a being as if I were to call the sun pale or black (Serm. 9).²¹

by which the One, Principle of operation, turns back upon its own inoperative and unknowable Essence, thereby manifesting its absolute identity with itself and with all that is" (*Théologie négative et Connaissance de Dieu*, III.12). However, we should not think that Eckhart, in his "inversion" of *esse* and *intelligere*, is somehow predicating a "nothingness of being" of God, the "*Dieu sans Être*" of modern theology ("*Deus est Esse*", says the first proposition of his unfinished *Opus tripartitum*!). Rather, it is Intellect, i.e. the "*Verbum sine verbo, aut potius super omne verbum*", that is a properly speaking a Nothing ("*intellectus, inquantum intellectus, nihil est*", cf. Quaes. Par. II), that is to say the Non-being that is the very condition of possibility for all being. The divine Intellection does not "exclude" being as such. The point is more subtle. All Eckhart is trying to say is that it's not as if (like in St. Thomas) God's perfect being simply "includes" knowing (and living) by virtue of its infinite perfection, but that God's *esse infinitum* is first and foremost a knowing ("*non ita videtur mihi modo, ut quia sit, ideo intelligat, sed quia intelligit, ideo est*"). Insofar as we (analogically) predicate being of God it simply is His *intelligere* and insofar we speak (univocally) of being, i.e. as *ousia* subjected to the Aristotelian categories, it is "within the Trinity", not as being but as intellect, i.e. circumscribed by the divine Knowing.

²¹ Cf. Shah-Kazemi (*Paths to Transcendence*, III.1.2): "God's first 'act' was to establish being ... When Eckhart says that 'God works beyond being' this would appear to mean that the 'work' of Beyond-Being is to establish Being, and this, in a place 'where no being was' – thus, He works also 'in non-being'. Speaking in accordance with Eckhart's temporal and spatial imagery, one could say that Being crystallizes in an intelligible, not existential, 'space' formerly occupied by nothingness, and it is by the very fact of the conceivable opposition between Being and the non-being that it replaces or displaces, that the relativity of Being

It seems we are approaching the “Superessential Trinity” (*Trias hyperousie, kai hypertheë*) that Dionysius talks about, “Knowledge knowing Itself by Itself” (*Got in sîn selbes bekanntnisse bekennet sich selben im selben*) in one infinite and unrestricted Act that does not in any way amount to a “rupture” of primordial *all-mügentheit*, but is its full comprehension, a “perfect insight and thorough knowing of Himself by Himself” (*ein vollkommen insehen in sich selber und ein abgründic durchkennen sîn selbes mit im selber*), which “scrutinizes even the depths of God” (1. Cor. 2:10), “every hidden cranny of the Godhead” (Serm. X).

Already it should be clear that the Son cannot strictly speaking be a “lesser Absolute”, a kind of Philonic *logos*, or a primary determination (viz. “crystallization”) like the Platonic *Noûs*, but the full Knowledge of the *grunt* itself and as such identical to it (“*per omnia coaequalem Deum genuit*”).

All that the Father has and is, the profundity of the divine Being and the Divine Nature, He brings forth all at once in His only-begotten Son. That is what the Son hears from the Father, that is what He has revealed to us (Serm. 29).

What the Father gives to the Son is nothing else but the Divine Essence in all its Infinity, which makes Him not simply an “image of God” but of the Godhead itself (“*bilde gotes und der gotheit*”): *Lumen de Lumine*.²² In Him truly “dwells the Fullness of the Godhead” (Col. 2:9), which also means that one cannot speak of a “God beyond God” in the proper sense, for the Son is the perfect revelation of the superessential *Deus absconditus*, “*des unbekanten übergoteten gotes*”, to Himself: “the glance returned by His own Essence”.²³

is manifest ... One could say that God becomes Being, where previously there was nothing”.

²² “God is a light shining in itself in silent stillness; the one Light, the one Essence itself, which knows and understands itself. The understanding of this unique Light is the Light from the Light, it is the eternal Person of the Son ... The Word of the Father is none other than His understanding of Himself. The understanding of the Father understands that He understands, and that His understanding understands is the same as that He is who is understanding. That is, the Light from the Light. ... The Father embraces His own Nature in the quiet darkness of His eternal Essence which is known to none except Himself. And the glance returned by His own Nature is His eternal Son” (Pf. LVIII1).

²³ Cf. Kelley, *Op. cit.* II.2: “The Word of God in God is God in every respect, is identically the Principle, and whatever may be predicated of God may also be

But of course, the Son isn't simply identical to the Essence either (Eckhart is not a modalist). There's still a (purely intellectual) distinction to be made between *Hypostases* and *Ousia* as well as an ontological priority of the Essence which, in itself, does neither generate nor is it generated ("*ingenitum est et non gignens*", i.e. Erigena's *natura non creata non creans*). However, this distinction does not in any way imply a real difference between both, much less a strict dichotomy of "lesser" and "supreme Absolute". The Father is distinct from the Essence insofar as He generates the Son – "Where the eternal Word arises in the Essential Mind (i.e. the Father), there Motherhood has a paternal name (*da hat diu muoterlicheit vaterlichen namen*) and performs paternal work" (Pf. CIII). But, in generating it, He Himself eternally "remains in the *grunt*" (Serm. 51) and does in no way "step out of Himself", meaning that ultimately "there is no difference at all between the Person of the Father and the *grunt*" (cf. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, IV.2). We might perhaps say that the Father (*qui fons est totius deitatis*) is the Essence as "object" of its own Knowledge, whereas this Knowledge (i.e. the Son) is distinct from the Essence, viz. the Father (the Principle of operation), insofar as He is the infinite Act of self-comprehension; but in the non-duality of the Spirit "subject" and "object" are simply and absolutely One. And thus we may conclude that "it is in fact definitive of Christianity to transcend that 'God beyond God' conception: to reject the idea of a Sabellian Trinity".

Recall the words of Christ himself: 'He that sees me sees the Father', which permit us to conclude that the Father is the Godhead seen in the Son. The Godhead – the 'hidden treasure' – is revealed or 'known' in the Son, in relation to whom he 'becomes' the Father" (Smith, *Loc. cit.*)²⁴

predicated of the eternal Word." Thus also Aquinas, *Compen. Theo.* §41: "*In Deo autem idem est esse et intelligere. Verbum igitur Dei quod est in Deo, cuius verbum est secundum esse intelligibile, idem esse habet cum Deo, cuius est verbum. Et per hoc oportet quod sit eiusdem essentiae et naturae cum ipso, et quod omnia quaecumque de Deo dicuntur, verbo Dei convenient*".

²⁴ Similarly Flasch, *Meister Eckhart*, XIV: "Is Eckhart's God a hidden God? I hesitate to answer in the affirmative. Certainly, every principle is hidden within itself, but insofar as it is a principle, it steps outside itself and reveals itself. That is the standpoint of the universal philosophy of the logos. God is unknown, but the Son, who came out of the Godhead's bosom, revealed him to us. His light shines forth in the darkness and overcomes it – within the Son and the sons"; *lux in luce et in lucem se toto se totum penetrans*.

Nevertheless, this is only one aspect of it, for the Word is “spoken and unspoken”, as Eckhart tells us, and so the “inner boiling” (*bullitio*) of the infinitely fecund Essence “did not permit it to remain unproductive in itself, but moved it to productive action, in the excess which is generative of all things” (Dionysius, *Div. Nom.* IV.10).

In the eternal birth the Father (as “Essence” or *grunt*) begets the Son and in His Word knows (or “affirms”) Himself as Father (“Isness”), and this unrestricted Act of perfect Self-Knowledge gives rise to Infinite Love and Blessedness which “boils over” (*ebullitio*) into the totality manifestation.²⁵ Thus, the eternal circle-dance of procession and return, *proödos – epistrophê*, in which the three Persons eternally know and love Themselves, becomes the source of all being and the prototype of the

²⁵ There is a certain analogy between the three terms of this procession – viz. Knowledge, Isness (or Aseity), and Blessedness – and the Hindu triad of *Sat-cit-ânanda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss) that has often been noted and which becomes even more pertinent at present since Eckhart (like many other scholastics before him) sometimes correlates the three transcendentals “Oneness” (*unum*), “Truth” (*verum*), “Goodness” (*bonum*) to the Persons of the Trinity. Thus, even in the *emanatio ad extra*, creatures are said to proceed “*ab uno mediante vero*”, that is to say from the One (corresponding, *analogice*, to the Father), through the True, i.e. the intelligible creation (*ens cognitivum*) linked to the Son, as individual beings (the *ens reale* or *ens extra in rebus naturalis*), corresponding to the Goodness of the Holy Spirit. We might even approach this ternary to the principal Names of God as revealed in Holy Scripture, for not only does He call Himself “Being” (Ex. 3:14), but He is also hymned as “Light” (1. Joh. 1:5), i.e. Knowledge or the Son (who, according to the scholastics, proceeds in the mode of intellection) and “Love” (1. Joh. 4:8), i.e. the Spirit (proceeding by mode of volition). This infinite Love and Blessedness, of which the Holy Spirit is the hypostatic manifestation, has also been approached to *mâyâ in divinis* as the universal womb and substratum of manifestation: “Divine Love is the very fabric of Universal Existence ... it is the *locus*, receptacle, matrix in which God establishes the creation”, says Borella (*Amour et Vérité*, XVII) and the Abbé Stéphane writes: “In the procession of the Knowledge through which the Father (*Sat*) engenders the Son (*Cit*), the Father does not know any ‘object’, for ‘That which knows what is known is itself unknowable, and this is the Self (*âtman*) in all things’ [*Bṛihadâraṇyaka Upanishad*]. Just as God doesn’t know what He is because He is no ‘what’, God (*Sat*) is absolute, pure Knowledge (*Cit*), but this knowledge ‘of nothing’ is the same as ignorance (*Docta Ignorantia*) which is nothing else but *Mâyâ*, who is, insofar as she is the *Shakti* of *Brahman*, nothing else but the All-Possibility, the Omnipotence, the Will, pure and absolute Love, the Holy Spirit which proceeds from the Father (and the Son, according to the Latins) by the mode of Will, and who is likewise Blessedness (*Ânanda*). It is in this context that the mystery or ‘miracle’ of Existence is situated” (*Ésotérisme Chrétien*, I.1.3).

consecutive “going forth” into creation.

God, insofar He is good, is the principle of the ‘boiling over’ *ad extra*, but considered under His (generative) aspect He is the principle of the ‘boiling’ (*bullitionis*) in Himself, which acts as exemplary cause of the ‘boiling over’ (*ebullitionem*). Thus the procession of the Persons *in divinis* is prior to it and its cause and exemplar (Serm. XXV).

Even though Eckhart speaks of an “earlier procession”, this is of course to be understood not as temporary but, again, in a strictly ontological manner, for “God works all His works in Himself and outside of Himself in one eternal moment” (Serm. 101) and “in the same eternal *now* in which He begets His co-eternal Son, He created the world” (In. Gen.) – “All that God works is one”, and it is but one Word He speaks, according to the Scripture: “God speaks once and for all” (Job 33:14).²⁶

The prophet says: ‘God spoke one Word and I heard two’ (Ps. 62:12); That is to say: God eternally speaks only once. His Word is only one. In this Word He speaks His Son and the Holy Spirit and all creatures, and yet there is only one Word in God. But the prophet says ‘I heard two’; that is to say: I hear God *and* the creatures (Serm. 30).

Eckhart also uses imagery of two “founts” or “sources” in this context:

The one fountain, from which grace wells up, is where the Father bears forth (*ûzgebirt*) His only-begotten Son ... The other fountain is where creatures flow out from God (Serm. 38).

But these two fountains, *bullitio* and *ebullitio* are – *in divinis* – merely “one fountain and one boiling”, for “in the inner-most fount, there is only one life, one being and one work” (Serm. 6).

In the “silent Word” (*Verbum sine verbo*) at the deepest bosom of the Father, God speaks only Himself, but in the Word that is spoken the creatures flow forth, singing loud praises unto the Lord: “*Omnis creatura laudet Dominum*”. Or we might say: God speaks His *Verbum insitum* to know Himself and creation results precisely from the “Joy” (*Ânanda*) of this self-recognition, which “boils over” into the *Verbum prolatum* as a

²⁶ “The heavenly Father speaks but one Word and speaks it eternally and in this Word He exhausts all His power, the entirety of His Divine Nature and all creatures” (Serm. 19). Likewise St. Anselm (*Monologion*, XXXIII): “In one and the same Word God speaks Himself and all He has created” (*Uno eodemque Verbo dicit seipsum et quaecumque fecit*).

desire to share His infinite riches.²⁷

As soon as the Father knew Himself in the Son, “He desired to go forth from His secret treasury of eternal Fatherhood, in which He eternally slept, remaining unspoken within” (Serm. 22). For (as St. Augustine tells us) the perfect recognition of the Father in the Son “is never without fruition, without love, without rejoicing”, and thus “His Knowledge becomes Love”, springing forth from “the recognition of His own Beauty” (St. Gregory of Nyssa). It remains thus entirely contingent, a pure gift, independent from any “necessity” whatsoever.²⁸

For God has not brought forth the Creation, that He should be thereby perfect, but for His own Manifestation and for His great Joy and Glory; not that this Joy first began with the Creation, no, for it was from Eternity in the great Mystery, yet only as a Spiritual Melody and Play in Himself. The Creation is the same Play out of Himself, as a model or instrument of the eternal Spirit (Böhme, *De. Signatura*, XVI.2).

Creation is in a sense the “outwardness” (*âzwendicheit*) of the eternal

²⁷ We should note that “*Verum insitum*” and “*prolatum*” are not terms Eckhart himself uses; rather he sometimes speaks of the former as the “*logos*” (*sive ratio*) and of the latter as “*verbum*”, or he refers to the intra-divine procession as the “personal Word” (or “wordless Word”), i.e. the Son, the pure Act in which God knows Himself as “other” (*alius* not *aliud*!), and to the *bullitio ad extra* as the “Word spoken impersonally” (*loquitur impersonaliter*) in which the *aliud* of creation is brought forth, receiving the divine act *ab alio* in a purely passive manner.

To keep up this distinction is indeed crucial to rule out any form of “pantheism” or “immanentism” from the get-go, for, as already Baader observed, most doctrinal errors result from a misguided conflation of both of these *Verbi*. Creation adds nothing to God, neither to His Being nor to His Knowledge of Himself (which is in fact the error of Hegelianism and other pantheistic confusions). “God doesn’t need art therapy to understand Himself”, for “it is not by means of this All that He knows Himself, but by His Knowledge that He becomes this All” (Coomsaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, I.3).

²⁸ But of course it needs hardly be pointed out that God utterly transcends the antinomy of “necessity” and “contingency” as understood *in via*: “Liberty and necessity are one, or, rather, can have no place in God” (Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, III). Nevertheless, we see that, what the “principle of undiminished procession” accomplishes by transposing the natural diffusion of the Good to the horizontal plane, is not only to assure the coequality of the Son but also to stop all notions of a necessary chain of emanation – Plotinus’ “leaky first Principle” which unavoidably trickles down unto the *mê on* of matter – dead in its tracks and creates a space for the free act of God, the *creatio ex nihilo* willed by the Creator out of sheer ungrudging love.

“Love-play” (*Liebesspiel*) that is the Divine Life, the “uttering forth” (*ûzsprechen*) of His eternal Word, which is eternally generated in the bosom of the Father, and which, at the same time, eternally flows forth into creation, while yet remaining eternally within the “silent darkness” (*stille dûsternisse*) of the inner-most fount.

In the beginning / high above all senses / is eternally the Word.

Oh rich treasure! / where beginning gives birth to beginning eternally.

Oh bosom of the Father / out of which eternally with joy / flows forth the Word.

But yet the bosom / has still retained the Word, ‘tis true! (*Granum sinapsis*).

Thus, the “mustard seed” of the *verbum absconditum* (cf. Serm. 101) blossoms forth into the buzzing multiplicity of creatures – “like an apple which grows upon a tree, which is not the tree itself, but grows from the power of the tree: even so all things are sprung forth out of the divine yearning and were created into an essence (*Wesen*) where no such thing was in the beginning, but only that self-same Mystery of the Eternal Generation, subsisting in eternal perfection” (Böhme, *Op. cit.* XVI.1).

And so all creatures become a “footprint of God” (*alle créâtûren sint ein vuozstaphe gotes*). For God is infinite Act and, according to Eckhart (In Sap.), every act unfolds in a threefold movement (*omnis actio naturae habet de sui integritate tria*): the tri-unity of “actor” (viz. knower) and “enacted” (known), united in the common act of knowledge, or the non-duality of “generator” (*generans*) and “generated” (*genitum*) in the common love between them (*amorem gignetis ad genitum et geniti ad gignentem*): “the union of loving love and loveable love”, as Cusanus put it.

On the highest level, this *circulum vitae* is revealed in the undiminished emanation of the Most Blessed Trinity, the “I am that I am” (*Eheieh asher Eheieh*) which not only expresses the self-identity of self-subsistent being, but also founds the absolute non-duality of the (supra-ontological) Essence and God’s unrestricted “Isness” (*esse*) that is consummated in this Knowing (cf. Exp. in Ex.; likewise Borella, *Penser l’Analogie*, X.2). But on a lower level too, this *logos* is repeated (albeit in a diminished manner) from the highest Seraph down to the lowliest worm, for every created being is likewise “called into being” by the Word and, turning back upon it in loving adoration, receives being, truth, and goodness from it.

Wherever we find a Creator and His creation, they agree in their delight in each other; everywhere in nature, we encounter begetting, sonship, and the unity of the begetter and the begotten (Flasch, *Meister Eckhart*, X).

In fact, for Eckhart, every act of production, indeed every act of knowledge itself, unfolds in a Trinitarian manner and thus the “dialogical” structure of *locutio et colluctio* reveals itself as the most fundamental pattern of reality; “*vestigium Trinitatis invenitur in unaquaque creatura*”²⁹ (*S.Th.* I.45.7; Augustine, *De Trin.* VI; on this cf. also Flasch, *Op. cit.* XIV). Creation thus proceeds like an “echo of the Word”, a “reverberation of the divine Logos”.

The eternal Word, or Divine Sound or Voice, which is a Spirit, has introduced itself with the generation of the great Mystery into Formings, viz. into an expressed Word or Sound (Böhme, *Op. cit.* XVI.3).

We however, who have not yet entered into the “castle” and are still “*longe in regio dissimilitudinis*” cannot help but “hear two”, sound (*Schall*) and echo (*Hall*), and even though it remains essential (from the viewpoint of creaturely knowledge) to uphold the formal distinction between the “two Words” – the “generative Word” *in sinu patris*, and the “creative Word” that goes to manifest His essential Glory – we should never lose sight of the fact that these are just different aspects of the same Reality, considered “*sub proprietate rationis et intellectus*” and “*sub proprietate esse*”.

Here we once more have to differentiate between two distinct senses of “being” (*esse*) which do not univocally coincide. Firstly, there’s being as the first “effect” (*extra factum*) the *ipsum esse* or *esse formale omnium* that is participated by the creatures. Secondly, there is God’s *esse absolutum* which coincides with His intellection and which is properly speaking a *super esse*, since it is that “Existence” (or “Isness”) which is (according to good Thomistic teaching) simply identical with His ineffable Essence (hence why Eckhart can begin his Parisian disputation by citing approvingly a whole series of propositions by “Brother Thomas” according to which *suam esse est suam intelligere*). If we predicate being of God in this manner, we have to deny it to the creatures (which consequently appear as a “*purus nihil*”) but if we predicate being creatures we have to deny it of God (a negation that, according the principle of analogy, can only ever be a “superabundant affirmation”, i.e.

²⁹ Even more explicitly Bonaventure: “All creatures proclaim the eternal birth” (*omnis creatura clamat generationem aeternam*). In fact, there is hardly a theologoumenon to be found in Eckhart, and – via Eckhart – in what is often called “German mysticism” as such, that is not at least prefigured in the Seraphic Doctor (cf. in this context Ruh, *Bonaventura deutsch*).

being *eminentialiter dicitur* or a “being beyond being”).³⁰

Thus, in this dialectical opposition of *esse* and *intelligere* (which we have already encountered above), Intellect is understood as pure identity (“*unitas sive unum videtur proprium intellectus solius*”), the *actus immanens* which stays eternally within, whereas being becomes the first “attribute” or “name” of God, the primordial procession: “*prima rerum creaturam est esse*” (*De Causis*, prop. 4).³¹ *Intelligere* is uncreatable in its very essence (*non habet rationem creabilis*) for it contains all reasons within it; it is the principle of absolute non-duality in which “knower and known are one”. *Esse*, on the other hand, is the primary determination, the first “*creabile*” (not yet necessarily *creatum*!), the principle of “communication” (*Deus in quantum est causa*) and thus of “otherness”; it comprises already a moment of (at least potential) “extraversion”, the “seed of duality”, for all participation already presupposes an opposition of giving and receiving, action and passivity (whereas in the Trinitarian prefiguration of this dichotomy, the Son, who receives all the plenitude of the divine Nature – “*pan to plêrôma tês Theotêtos*” –, is at the same time perfect Act).³²

³⁰ Cf. Quaes. Par. I: “And so I say that being does not pertain to God (*Deo non convenit esse*) and that he is not a being, but He is something higher than being. For as Aristotle says, that the eye must be colorless in order to perceive all colors, and that the intellect itself must not be determined by the forms given in nature in order to be able to recognize all of them, so I also deny God Himself being as such (*ipsum esse*) and the like, so that He can be the cause of all being and contain everything in Himself in advance (*omnia praebeat*), and that nothing is denied of God what is due to Him, but what is not due to Him. But these negations mean, according to John of Damascus (first book *On the Orthodox Faith*), in God the superabundance of affirmation. Thus I deny nothing of Him that is His by nature. Rather, I maintain that God pre-contains everything in Himself in purity, fullness (*plenitudine*), and completeness, wide and great, since He is the root and cause of all things (*existens radix et causa omnium*). And this is what He wanted to say when He said: ‘I am who I am’”. Similarly in Sermon 9: “When I have said that God is no being and is beyond being (*über wesene*), I do not have thereby denied Him being: rather I have exalted it in Him (*ich han ez in im gehoehet*)”.

³¹ Cf. also Dionysius, *De Div. Nom.* V.5: “In the first place before all else Being-in-itself was generated (*probeblêtai*)”. This notion of Being (“He who is”) as the primary Name has of course a long Patristic tradition (cf. Damascene, *De fide*, IX).

³² Cf. Sermon XXIX: “*Omne esse preter intellectus, extra intellectus, creatura est, creabile est, aliud est a Deo, Deus non est. In Deo enim non est aliud. Actus scilicet potentia sunt divisiones esse, entis universaliter create. Esse autem primus actus est, prima divisio est. In intellectu aut in Deo nulla divisio est*”.

Eckhart also draws a distinction between God as “the One” (meaning God as He is in Himself) and as “the Good” (meaning God insofar He is diffusive of Himself *ad extra*): “*Sîn ûzsmelzen daz ist sîn güete*”.³³

The One is the primal fountain of the first emanation, namely of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father by way of eternal procession. The Good is the source of the second, as we may say, the temporal production of creatures (In Ioh.).

Being pertains to Goodness; it is the “most common” (*daz aller gemeineste*), i.e. that which is shared by all (God as *esse omnium*³⁴), whereas “Word and Truth” (*wort und wârheit*) are that which is “most properly” predicated of God (*daz aller eigenlîcheste*), i.e. God as He is in Himself, utterly detached from all (*super esse*).

Envisaging God under His aspect of Being (*onitas* and *bonitas*) means contemplating Him as Creator or as first Cause – “the Principle of, and in relation to, universal manifestation” – not in His Absoluteness. Being is only the “outer court” or “antechambre” (*vorbürge*) of God, whereas Intellect (*vernünfftlicheit*) is the inner sanctum (“*niergen wonet got eigenlîcher dan in sînem tempel, in vernünfftlicheit*”). That’s why God’s Goodness cannot make me blessed. And whereas will takes God only under the cloak of His Goodness (*under dem velle der güete*), intellect loves God as He is, “naked” (*blôz*), “stripped bare of all Goodness and Being”; only it can

³³ Likewise St. Thomas: “The name Good is the principal name of God considered as (first) Cause, but does not designate God in His Absoluteness. For the Absolute precedes all causality” (*S.Th. I.13.11*).

³⁴ *Notabene*: God’s *esse omnium* is not univocally convertible with the *ens commune* (viz. *esse formale*) of creatures – “*Nec oportet, si dicimus quod Deus est esse tantum, ut in illorum errorem incidamus qui dixerunt quod Deus est illud esse universal quo quaelibet res est formaliter*” (Thomas, *De ente*, V.24). Nevertheless, God’s *esse*-(*intelligere*) contains the being of *entia* as the higher does the lower (that is to say as their *esse virtuale* in the divine Knowing) or like the Cause containing its effects. *In toto* we might thus outline a hierarchy of being similar to that put forth by Erigena in his “four divisions of Nature”, namely the Non-being which pertains above all to the mêontological Essence (*super esse*), the pure Isness (*impermixtio esse*) of God, identical with His Essence, which coincides with His Intellection (and which, as *esse omnium*, also encompasses all subsequently created being *causaliter*), thirdly the *esse commune* (or *ousia*) of the created things as the apex of the Pophyrian tree, and finally the individual existentiating act of each particular created substance (*esse hoc et hoc*).

love God in perfect purity, for “God is a Spirit and they that worship Him must worship in Spirit and in Truth” (Joh. 4:24). Indeed “God (in Himself) is neither good, better, nor best” and “whoever should say God is good would do Him as much injustice as if he called the sun black!” (Serm. 9).

Being is convertible with unity but Intellect is absolutely simple, and in this sense they truly are “as different as heaven”; yet, these are not mutually exclutory or become two separate hypostases like in the “vertical” *taxis* of Platonic emanation, but merely correspond to two different perspectives on the One God: the divine Infinitude envisaged under its “positive” and “negative” aspect, i.e. as all-inclusive plenitude and all-exclusive self-identity³⁵: “The being of all beings is the Divinity above being” (Dionysius). For in the *reditio completa*, in which God knows Himself and in Himself all things, all is simply one³⁶; here, in the “infinite sphere” (*cuius tot sunt circumferentie quot puncta*), where the end curves back into the beginning, all oppositions of truth and goodness, immanence and transcendence, unity and multiplicity are eternally reconciled, “*flores mei est fructus*”.

In this “eternal and immutable going out of Godhead into being, and from being into Godhead”, in which the first and second *Parmenides* hypothesis find themselves dialectically fused, we are thus far from a simply binary of “Being” and “beyond Being”, *Ishvara* and *Brahman*. In fact, it is precisely this dichotomy that the doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood, is bound to overcome: God in His unconditioned “nudity” is the totally Indistinct, yet in the *reditio sui ipsius* He becomes perfectly manifest in the Divine Knowing thereby revealing Himself – qua His Indistinctness – as the utterly distinct One. Nevertheless, God *ipse* is neither “this” nor “that” but both, negating the negation in the *coincidentia oppositorum*, hence why Eckhart always speaks of the divine *plenitudo* (indistinctness) and *puritas* (distinction) in a single

³⁵ Cf. Lib. Parab. Gen.: “*Notandum primo quod in Deo, principio omnium, est considerate duo, ut sic dicamus: puta, quod ipse est esse verum rationale primordiale [i.e. God as Good]; adhuc etiam est ipsum considerare sub ratione qua intellectus est [i.e. God as Truth]*”.

³⁶ Cf. Exp. in Sap: “*Ubi notandum, quod sicut unum et ens convertibiliter se habent, sic simplicitas et intellectualitas. Radix enim prima et natura intellectualitatis est simplicitas. Argumentum huius est: primo, quia simplex et ipsum solum redit se toto super se ipsum totum reditione completa, et propter hoc, ex De Causis, est sciens se ipsum et omnia per essentiam*”.

breath.³⁷

God is the utterly Indistinct One and yet, precisely in this indistinctness, He is distinct from all things (“*Deus indistinctum quoddam est quod sua indistinctione distinguitur*”); He is the Unique One and the Most Common (*daz aller gemeineste*), “*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*”, the Unspeakable and the *Nomen Omninomabile*³⁸, and only because He is *tota deforis* can He be *tota intus* and indeed *intimissimus*.³⁹ In short: God is simply “One” in the fullest sense (*omnibus modis et secundum omnem rationem*), both as that which transcends all number (for “*illud vere est unum in quo nullus numerus est*”) as well as the “*fons et origio omnium numerorum*” which creates and contains them all and by virtue of which all partakes of unity and being (“*omne quod est, idcirco est, quia unum est*”).

Yet, this Oneness (*ein*) is not merely static but a dynamism (*einunge*), following the Trinitarian dynamics of the eternal birth, in

³⁷ Formulated dialectically we might say that the Thesis (Identity) is negated by the Anti-thesis (Difference), which is then overcome in the Synthesis (*sive negatio negationis*). Cf. Exp. in Ex.: “*Sciendum ergo, quod nihil tam dissimile quam Creator et quilibet creatura. Rursus, secundo, nihil tam simile quam Creator et creatura quilibet. Adhuc autem tertio, nihil tam dissimile pariter et simile alteri cuiquam quam Deus et creatura quilibet sunt et dissimilar et similia pariter*”.

³⁸ Cf. Dionysius, De Div. Nom. I.5: “Thus the Sacred Writers celebrate It [the Thearchy] by every Name while yet calling it Nameless (*anônymon*)”.

³⁹ Cf. Lossky, *Théologie Négative*, III.7/V.2: “The One manifest the absolute indistinction of the *Esse* or Essence, but at the same time, in opposing to all that is, it determines the divine Being in relation to the multiple. ‘Distinct’ from the *omnia*, the divine ‘indistinction’ is the Essence itself, the *puritas essendi*; ‘indistinct’ from all that is, it is the omni-unity and the *plenitudo essendi* in the One, the paternal Intellect, as the principle of its all-powerful act ... As a synthesis of the two hypotheses of the Neoplatonist, the One of Meister Eckhart thus unites, in the Person of the Father, the supreme distinction of the Being that is *unique*, namely the pure identity with itself, and the indistinction of the Being that is *one* – omni-unity which extends its plenitude to all that is”. In fact, this unification of the “One” and “One-Being”, *super esse* and *esse omnium*, in a single “hypostasis” can be identified as one of the prime characteristics of the Christian adaption of Platonic patterns of thought, starting already with the Areopagite and being eventually perfected in the works of Nicholas of Cusa (on this “dialectical Platonism” of Erigena, Eckhart, and Cusanus, cf. also the works of Werner Beierwaltes, e.g. *Identität und Differenz: Zum Prinzip Cusanischen Denkens*).

which Identity and Difference, Emptiness and Plenitude, movement and Sabbathical rest, eternally coincide (*monê-proödos-epistrophê*). And in now tracing its “unmoving movement” in a last recapitulation, we might finally even speak of a *triplex modus essendi* of the (one) Word: The superessential Silence of the secret treasury in which Father and Son eternal “gaze upon each other” (*sich aneschouwen* and *an-minnen*), constitutes, as it were, the primordial point; here there is “not even One” (*nomen innominabile*), absolute indistinction, the supreme Nothingness of Intellect “knowing without knowing” (*monê*). But in in the “inner boiling” of the Essence (*bullitio sive parturitio*) the point extends without extending, “liquefies” (*in se fervens et in se ipso et in se ipsum liquescens et bulliens*), defining Itself, in the “personal Word” (*in personis proprietates*), as non-Other from Itself and thereby (in this self-identity) as the “wholly Other”.⁴⁰ In the principal procession (*proödos*), infinite indistinctness “flips” into the maximum alterity, which negates the negation of primal Non-being and founds itself as the *esse-intelligere* that is utterly beyond, self-sufficient, blessed and pure. However, the *negatio negationis* being at the same time *purissima affirmatio*, the circle closes itself in the return (*epistrophê*) and flows back into its primal fount, the divine Infinity, where “absolute unity is absolute plurality, absolute identity is absolute difference, absolute actuality is absolute possibility” (Cusanus⁴¹).

This *sphaera infinita*, the Ouroboros of the Trinity, eternally surging up from Knowledge into Love and back into the inner fount, spirals out

⁴⁰ In a similar way Cusanus should later try to formulate the undiminished self-affirmation (by way of the double negation) of the Uni-Trinity in the dictum “*Non aliud est non aliud quam non aliud*”: “The Definition that defines itself and all things” (cf. *De li non aliud*).

⁴¹ Indeed, Cusanus, elaborating on Eckhart, even says that the greatest conceivable Oneness must be triune, encompassing in itself the circular dialectic of indistinction, distinction, and union: “If Oneness is the greatest and most perfect understanding, then whoever does not attain to the trinity of this Oneness does not rightly conceive of oneness. For oneness is only threeness, since oneness indicates indivision, distinctness, and union. Indeed, indivision is from oneness – as are also distinctness and union (*unio sive conexio*). Hence, the greatest Oneness is not other than indivision, distinctness, and union. Since it is indivision, it is eternity and without beginning. Since it is distinctness, it is from immutable eternity. And since it is union, it proceeds from both” (*De docta*, I.10). Expressed once more dialectically we might say that, *in divinis*, infinite Indistinction (*in essentia unitas*) gives rise to infinite Alterity (*in personis proprietates*), which is then reconciled in the infinite “coincidence” or non-duality of both (*in maiestate aequalitas*).

into the *rota mundi*⁴², the “impersonal Word” (*esse formale omnium*), in which all the hidden riches of the Godhead radiate outwards into manifestation; both “wheels”, the circle-dance of the Divinity and its “echo” reverberating within it and without, revolving around each other on the fixed axis of primal Knowing like a wheel within a wheel, “*rota in medio rotae*” (Ez. 1:X).⁴³

The inner-divine Communion of the “Divine Liturgy” (*Trisagion*) is thus the fountainhead of all being – a fountain flowing eternally into itself, for the Love-play of the Trinitarian circumincession is like closed circle which encompasses all and outside of which there is simply nothing.⁴⁴

⁴² “Being is God’s circle, the circle of the Knowledge that He is”, says the Meister, and “this circle is all the Trinity has ever wrought. Why is the work of the Trinity called a circle? Because the Trinity is the origin of all things and all things return into their origin ... The circumference is the incomprehensible work of the Three Persons and the union of the Persons is the essence of the Point. In this point God runs through change without otherness involving into unity of Essence, and the soul that is one with this fixed point is capable of all things” (Tractates). Indeed this circle – “God’s ring”, as Eckhart often calls it – is even echoed in the historical Incarnation, for in Christ the beginning meets the end, Alpha and Omega, and in the Victory of Golgotha – the cross planted on the mountain – He joins the supreme exaltedness to the lower-most depths of humility: “*sicut in circulo ultimum conjugitur principio, sic in incarnatione supremum conjugatur imo, ut Deus limo, et primum postremo*” (Bonaventure). In His descent, the Son reveals the Father in the form of a servant, and in His ascension the Spirit shows forth the servant in the Glory of God; in the one God is concealed as man and in the Light of the other the man is revealed as God, such is the “three-dimensionality” of Incarnation.

⁴³ Cf. Liber Parab. Gen.: “*Nunc, [Gen. 1] docet modum productionis, dicens: ‘Dixitque Deus’, etc. Ubi hoc primo notandum, quod ipsum est quod hic dicitur in verbis iam premissis – ‘dixitque Deus’, etc. – idem est cum illo, quod Ioh. 1 dicitur: ‘In principio erat Verbum’, etc., usque ibi: ‘sine ipso factum est nihil’. Qui enim dicit utique verbum et verbo dicit, nec quidquam nisi verbum et verbo dicit nec operator, in quantum dicens est, ut sic sit rota in medio rotae, novum testamentum in veteri, secundum visionem Ezechielis.*”

⁴⁴ This is also beautifully shown in Rublev’s *Icon of the Trinity*, in which the “round table” of manifestation resides within the “circle” (circumincession) of the Divine Persons, “the Trinitarian Circle which leads all things from God to God and which produces, in-dwells and contains the whole existential circle of creation”: “In fact creation appears, in light of the Eckhartian teachings, like a circle which starts and ends in the Void from which it proceeds, a Void which is the Darkness, or more-than-luminous Clarity, of the divine Nothingness” (Schaya, *La Creation en Dieu*, IV). “*Die Gottheit ist ein Brunnen, aus ihr kommt alles her / und läuft auch wieder hin. Drum ist sie auch das Meer*” (Silesius).

In God the circle closes in on itself. For by Knowing God conceives His Word, which is the ground of all that is known by Him. He knows all by knowing Himself and from this Word proceeds the Love for all and for Himself. This is why someone has said that ‘God is a monad, which, begetting a monad, turns back upon itself in burning adoration’. And thus the circle is closed, and there is nothing which could be added to it (St. Thomas, *De Pot.* IX.9).

And here we too have come full circle, for, approaching the end of our inquiry, there still remains the question concerning that “castle” we heard about in the very beginning and in which “not even God can gaze into”. Did we not hear after all that it would cost him all His “divine Names” and “personal properties”?

Certainly, for the “castle” of the superessential *grunt*, in which no otherness has ever entered, is “beyond difference and numeric diversity” (In Ioh.), beyond all “names and nature” (Serm. 53); but this is precisely why the “absolutely simple One” does not exclude absolute distinction, for here, in the inner-most fount, where all radii meet in one centre (“*gâr unbewegit stêt sîn punt*”), and where the paternal *grunt* knows Himself “without image or mediation” (*âne mittel und âne bilde*), there’s only the Supreme Identity, “distinction without distinction” (*underscheit âne underscheit*); here “the three Persons are simply and absolutely one” (In Ioh.), so that He is “One without oneness and Trinity without Threeness, Goodness without quality” (Serm. XI) – “Neither Father, nor Son nor Holy Spirit in this sense⁴⁵ but *Something* that is neither this or that” (Serm. 2).

Yet, the soul which, by the grace of God, “breaks through” (*durchbrichet*) into the hidden ground “where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” (Dionysius) has not left the *Trias hyperousie* behind, but, having come to the fully “realization” of the Divine Knowledge in which “Knower and Known are one”, has become “son” itself (“*tad tvam asi*”),

⁴⁵ That is to say, insofar we can predicate any specific attributes (e.g. oneness, truth, goodness) or “works” (power, likeness, unification) of them. For, as we pointed out in the very beginning, all affirmative names of God are predicated in relation to created things and, following Cusanus (*De docta*, I.24/26), we might even say that this likewise true of the names of the Divine Persons, insofar as they signify God according some individual property (*secundum aliquam proprietatem particularem*): “For created things begin to be by virtue of the fact that God is Father; they are perfected by virtue of the fact that He is Son; they harmonize with the universal order of things by virtue of the fact that He is Holy Spirit”.

that “Something” which is pure *Thatness*⁴⁶ (*ipsum intelligere*).

For “in the eternal Word, that which hears is at the same that which is heard” (Serm. 18). Here “the Father begets me as His only-begotten Son without any distinction” (Serm. 6) and receiving all “likeness” (*glichnis*) in the Son, I too expire all duality by “breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father, which is the Holy Spirit Himself” (St. John of the Cross, *Canticle*) – “*Os meum aperui et attraxi Spiritum*” (Ps. 119). “In the inner-most fount, there I well forth in the Holy Spirit; *there*, there is only one knowing one act and one life” (Serm. 6). Certainly, this is “non-dualism”, but it is also profoundly Trinitarian.⁴⁷

The infamous passage, in which Eckhart seemed to denigrate the Trinity to “lesser Absolute” thus turns out to be an affirmation of the absolute non-duality of *Unum* and *Trinitas*, Father and Son – “He who sees me sees the Father” (Joh. 14:9) and where the Father is there’s the Son and where the Son is not, there’s simply “not even nothing” (“*Ab initio quo fuit unum, fuerit semper et alterum*”). For the eternal Father has only one will: to give birth to His only-begotten Son. And so He gives birth to the Son without ceasing in the unity of His Nature; this is the work of the Father, and outside it there’s nothing at all.

The Father Himself hears nothing but this same Word, knows nothing but this same Word, speaks nothing but this same Word, begets nothing but this same Word. In this same Word the Father hears, the Father knows, the Father gives birth to Himself, and this very Word and all things, and His Godhead in its very depth (*sine gotheit al ze grunde*), He bears Himself according to His Nature and this Word with the *same* nature in *another* Person ... In this Word the Father speaks my spirit (*geist*) and the spirit of each man equally in the same Word. In that speaking you and I are truly sons of God just like the Word itself. For, as I said before, the Father knows nothing but that same Word and Himself and all the Divine Nature and all

⁴⁶ Cf. Flasch, *Op. cit.* XI: “God says: ‘I am, *ego sum*’. Pure Being, naked Being, belongs only to the single subject that is pure Being. God’s quiddity (*quidditas*), what He is, is His pure thatness (*anitas*), that He ... God has no other essence than His thatness, His *anitas*. This pure ‘That’ simply means Being ... Eckhart explains God’s name thus: within God, Essence and Existence are identical. His Essence does not require additional determinations; it is His Existence. He is Isness”.

⁴⁷ Thus also Lossky, who discovers in Eckhart “a vision of the unity of being that is not that of a pantheistic monism, but rather of a Christian ‘non-dualism’, answering to the idea of the creation of the world *ex nihilo* by the all-mighty God of the Bible – ‘He who is’” (*Op. cit.* V.3; on a similar note cf. also Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik*, as well as Smith and Kelley, *Op. cit.*).

things in this Word, and all that He knows therein is like the Word and is the same Word really and in truth (*waerliche in der wârheit*) ... When the Father gives and reveals to you this Understanding (*bekantnisse*) He's giving you all He has to offer, all His Godhead, all His Bliss, holding nothing back. He gives you His eternal Word, and in the same Word He gives you at once His own Life, His own Being and His Deity (*gotheit*): for the Father and the Word are *two* Persons but *one* Life and *one* Being, undivided. When the Father takes you into this light, so that you may behold (*vernünfftliche ane ze schouwenne*) this light in this light in the same manner as He knows Himself and all things according to His paternal power in this Word – the same Word according to reason and truth, as I have said – then He gives you the power to give birth to yourself and all things with Him and indeed He gives you His own power, just like He gives it to the Word. And then you give birth with the Father unceasingly in the Father's power to yourself and all things in one present Now (*in einem gegenwertigen nû*). In this light, as I have said, the Father recognizes no difference between you and Him, no more or less than between Himself and the same Word. For the Father and yourself and all things and the same Word are one in the light (Serm. 49, slightly abbreviated/edited for comprehension).

As such let it also be remembered that, as we were told in the very beginning, it is none other than Christ who “enters into the castle and is received there” (*Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum ... et excepit illum in domum suam*) and, likewise, the only way for us to enter there is by union (*einunge*) with the Son, by “putting off the old man” (Eph. 4:22) and abandoning (*lâzen*) all things and ourselves in the perfect spiritual poverty, “*beati pauperes spiritu*”. For only he who is “born of God” (1. Joh. 5:1) is received there, and, upon entering, he is “neither Henry nor Conrad, nor this man so and so ... but *there* he is the True Man; in that Man all men are one Man and that Man is Christ eternal” (Serm. XXXIV) – “*Vivo autem, iam non ego: vivit vero in me Christus*” (Gal. 2:20).

Thus, “no one can get to Father except through the Son” (Joh. 14:16) and it is only Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, who can lead the soul into that *bürgelîn*, into the “banqueting hall” (Cant. 2:4), “the chamber of Him that conceived me” (Cant. 3:4).

When He went out He did not come out except with the wish to return to the chamber with His bride. This chamber is the silent darkness of the mysterious Fatherhood. When He went forth from the Most High, He wanted to show her the hidden mystery of His secret Godhead, where He is at rest with Himself and all creatures (Serm. 22).

“The King has brought me into His chambers” (Cant. 1:4), and in this

eternal out- and in-flowing of the Word, the “hidden treasure” is revealed, the *Deus absconditus* becomes *Deus revelatus*, “*lux in tenebris lucet*”.⁴⁸ Thus there is “nothing hidden that won’t be revealed” (Lk. 12:2) and we dare hope that, *in illo tempore*, we may “know Him, as we are known” (1. Cor. 13:12); not merely His “outward face turned towards the creatures”, but – *Deo volente* – “Him as He is” (1. Joh. 3:2). For “no one sees the Godhead except Him who is Himself God and dwells at the bosom of the Father; He has revealed Him to us” (Joh. 1:18).

Thus the soul, like the bride in the *Song of Songs*, says: ‘Now, I have gone round the circle of the whole world without ever reaching the end; so I plunged myself into the central point, for it has charmed me with its aspect!’

This central point is the creative power (*Schöpfervermögen*) of the Most Holy Trinity, by which the three Persons, accomplish all their works, while staying ever unmoved ... All three are but one power and this unmoving point is the unity of the Trinity.

‘He has wounded me with one glance of His eyes!’ (Cant. 4:9); this glance is the unitive power, which emanates from the centre, and with it He (God) separates the soul from all created and changeable things; in this glance He draws her back into the one point in which she is unified and eternally affirmed ... And when the soul is stripped of her own being, so that only God is her being, then she sees, grasps and knows God in God Himself ... And there the soul is both the knower and the known! (Tractates).

That we may thus enter into the secret treasury of the divine Bridegroom and be received there, so help us God. Amen.

⁴⁸ Cf. Smith, *Loc. cit.*: “When Eckhart affirms that ‘God Himself never for an instant looks into it’ – into that Godhead [i.e. the *bürgelîn*] – he is saying, in effect, that the Unknown God ‘looked into’ ceases to be a hidden treasure: that is all”. For, as we’ve seen, the Son is the perfect Knowledge of the *grunt*, its perfect “Self-revelation”, and thus the only knowledge of the Godhead is “through the Spirit *in* the Son” not “beyond Him” – “It is the nature of the Word to reveal what is hidden” (Serm. 101).

